

by Tom McSorley



Ernest

ERNEST

Directed by Keith Behrman, 2000, Canadian Film Centre, 16mm, 20 minutes

The spirit of Oscar Wilde permeates Keith Behrman's *Ernest*. Wilde famously defined the cynic as someone who knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing. While we can all recognize such a figure in a politician, banker or stockbroker, imagine if your father is one of these stark raving cynics. In this satirical detonation of neo-con ideology, rendered in Behrman's trademark austere and evocative style, a teenager named Ernest tries to survive that very predicament. Subjected to an audit of his allowance by his crazed, candy-gobbling father (a flawless Frank Moore), Ernest (talented newcomer David Reale) steals a basketball from school in order to justify an expense receipt for which he cannot account. This leads to further complications. Although its rather sentimental conclusion almost undoes its incisive critique, *Ernest* issues a potent and timely challenge to "common sense" and other forms of absolutist thinking. In this age of the Harris-Klein-Day triumvirate of contempt and cynicism, and to paraphrase Wilde again, the importance of being Ernest has never been so ably demonstrated or so utterly necessary. ■

TAKE-OUT

Directed by Jean-François Monette, 2000, Bare Bone Films Inc. (Montreal), 35mm, 45 minutes

Rory is in high school and works delivering take-out chicken. One evening he encounters Pete, a lawyer living in a large house. To his surprise and confusion, Rory feels a powerful attraction to him. Wrestling with his sexual orientation, Rory imagines a series of erotic and violent fantasies as he tries to regain his emotional equilibrium. Through extensive use of time-lapse photography and image-acceleration techniques, Jean-François Monette constructs the tangled and solitary interior of his character with considerable force. While visually arresting, these techniques are also distracting; they threaten to reduce the film's attempt at a serious study of desire to glossy eye candy. *Take-Out's* deep-fried stylistic excesses aside, though, Rory's lonely passion is often compelling viewing and for the reward of a marvellous concluding sequence, the film's over-extended dramatic "delivery" can be forgiven. ■

TRACES ON THE ROCK OF ELSEWHERE

Directed by Majdi El-Omari, 1999, Phoenix Films (Montreal), 16mm, 14 minutes

Salma and Pierre live in a Montreal suburb. It is winter. Salma receives a letter from her native Palestine, which she left two decades ago. The arrival of the letter stirs up disturbing memories of her troubled past, and she struggles to cope with a sudden torrent of inner pain. Although the early scenes between Salma (Samia Costandi) and Pierre (Robert Morin) are achingly awkward, the drama of Salma's inner journey gathers a slow and sure momentum, evoked in El-Omari's intelligent sound editing and concentrated in two startling freeze-frame images deployed in the film. His use of Montreal's wintry cityscape is also assured and appropriate, and underscores not only his character's alienation but also El-Omari's connection to a long tradition of suggestive winter imagery in Quebec cinema. *Traces on the Rock of Elsewhere's* unaffected style is refreshing, and it refuses to seek sanctuary from its unabashed sincerity in hip formalism or in cool appraisals of its protagonist's intimate anguish. ■

CLEAN RITE COWBOY

Directed by Michael J. Downing, 2000, OFDC Calling Card Program, 35mm, 20 minutes

This touching humanist drama of diminished expectations and lost love begins and ends in faceless suburbia. Former insurance executive now carpet cleaner Henry (John Robinson), locked in a loveless marriage, takes his son Paul with him on the job. His last client on a particularly bad day is Diane (Christie MacFayden), a woman he once loved in high school. As they gradually reignite past passions, Paul watches television. He also watches his father. Smartly designed and with a haunting soundtrack by Blue Rodeo's Greg Keelor, *Clean Rite Cowboy* features fine, nuanced performances by both Robinson and the luminous MacFayden. (Where has she been since Peter Mettler's *In The Top of His Head?* This woman should be a star.) Here's hoping that such a "calling card" will not curse Downing with the "success" of becoming a creatively stifled director-for-hire dictated to by other people's money and ideas. ■

MONDAY WITH THE MARTINS

Directed by Jeffrey Erbach, 2000, Winnipeg Film Group, 16mm, 5 minutes

Arguably the most talented and certainly the most creepy filmmaker of the post-Paizs/Maddin generation in Winnipeg, Jeffrey Erbach's latest is an unsettling erotic *étude* in the key of weird: a strange little horny confection. In a nondescript house, while female Martin watches pornography, male Martin tries to repair his "tool" so he won't have to resort to his third hand again. That's right, his third hand. You know, the one that hangs between his legs and has a mind of its own. Into his odd yet orderly *mise en scène*, Erbach deftly integrates Ken Gregory's densely textured sound design, consisting of the distorted moaning of porn actors and the ossified dialogue of the Mr. and Mrs. Martin. In the wheezy, David Lynchian suburbs of Jeffrey Erbach's Manitoba, men are putting very strange appendages into women, and the women are coaching their well-endowed but clumsy charges to the heights (or depths) of ecstasy. I wonder what happens on Tuesday. ■